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NSC FOR SENIOR DIRECT MICHAEL DORAN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/11/2016
TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM KDEM EG
SUBJECT: EGYPT: NSC SENIOR DIRECTOR MICHAEL DORAN
DISCUSSES REFORM WITH ACTIVISTS

Classified by CDA Stuart Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) In an October 3 meeting with pro-reform Egyptians on the margins of the Secretary's visit to Cairo, NSC Senior Director Michael Doran reiterated the USG's commitment to supporting political reform and freedom in Egypt and BMENA. Yomn El-Hamaqi (a member of Egypt's Consultative Council and on the ruling party's General Secretariat) expressed confidence that political reform is on track. Doran's other interlocutors, including independent parliamentarian Anwar Esmat Sadat (nephew of the late president), Ghada Shahbender of Shayfeenkum, and Saad Eddin Ibrahim of the Ibn Khaldun Center, were markedly more critical of the GOE's commitment to authentic reform. They discussed a wide range of issues, including charges of manipulation of the media by the security apparatus as means to undercut independent reformers. With the exception of NDP member El-Hamaqi, the group agreed that the USG should press the NDP and GOE to honor President Mubarak's 2005 campaign promises, which would help to fight the perception that the USG has backed away from reform in Egypt. End summary.

¶2. (C) In addition to Doran's four interlocutors, post had invited two others: leading Judges Club activist and a vice-president of the Court of Cassation, Hisham El-Bastawisi, who declined to attend after he failed to receive GOE authorization to participate, and Shura Council member Ossama El-Ghazaly Harb, who resigned from the NDP in early 2006 and is seeking to establish a new secular party, the National Democratic Front. Harb called in sick at the last minute.

The Good News on Reform

¶3. (C) Dr. Yomn El-Hamaqi, who is chair of the Economics Department at Ayn Shams University, said that she is pleased with the "very reasonable trajectory" of reform in Egypt. She asserted that Egypt was experiencing "dramatic legislative changes" and said that the NDP is making a major push to expand its appeal among women and youth, although she admitted that "youth participation" remains a major challenge. El-Hamaqi noted that Egypt's creaky education system, which focuses on rote memorization and fails to prepare secondary and tertiary graduates for the job market, is part of the problem. El-Hamaqi concluded that despite areas for improvement, reform in Egypt "is going well."

¶ 14. (C) Shahbender strongly disagreed with El-Hamaqi's assessment and argued that in education and other fields, the failure of the governmental system had created an opportunity for the Islamists to create an informal system (of education support and health care, for example) that addresses the actual needs of the citizenry, and builds the Islamists' legitimacy among ordinary Egyptians.

The Yellow Press

¶ 15. (C) Doran asked whether the Egyptian public uncritically accepted the Egyptian media's depiction of independent reformers as "foreign agents" when they receive small USG democracy grants. After all, the GOE receives nearly \$2 billion in USG assistance each year. Shahbender said that the GOE's control of the state-run media--along with certain low-circulation and nominally-independent newspapers, like Roz El-Youssef, which is widely believed to be financed by Gamal Mubarak ally Ahmed Ezz and to be closely linked to SSIS--allows it to "spin" reform issues in ways that do in fact successfully discredit any perceived critics of the GOE.

Sadat described his effort to start joint parliamentary consultations with the Israeli Knesset during the Lebanon crisis in July, which led to furious media attacks decrying him as a Zionist. Sadat suggested that the GOE was behind the attacks. Sadat said that most of the editors and publishers in charge of the GOE-controlled media are old-school Nasserists who are willing to twist reportage for political purposes or financial reward. Ibrahim added that "the top level of the regime" believes that it has a monopoly on relations with, and receiving assistance from, outside powers. The GOE jealously guards this perceived prerogative by labeling anyone else as "foreign agents."

A Pervasive Culture of Fear

¶ 16. (C) Shahbender asserted that SSIS is "much more present" on university campuses than are the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). SSIS involvement in campus politics aims to send the message to young people that they should not stray into areas of development, advocacy, or opposition politics. Shahbender claimed that all of Doran's interlocutors, with the exception of NDP member El-Hamaqi, "would pay a price" for meeting Doran. Sadat echoed this, saying "Security is very tough here, and it is everywhere." Shahbender said legislation (primarily Law 84/2002) allows the GOE to curtail the independence and grass roots outreach of Egypt's NGOs.

Whither the Islamists?

¶ 17. (C) Ibrahim noted that the GOE's successful intimidation and oppression of the secular opposition had not worked against the Islamists. Thanks to the emergency law, secular opponents and activists were effectively under "house arrest" since they cannot have a rally or public meeting without SSIS approval. By contrast, the Muslim Brotherhood, he asserted, has access to 100,000 mosques, and can "meet, organize, and serve its constituency five times per day." Ibrahim noted that Islamists had only won two percent of the parliamentary seats in 1984, but 20 percent in 2005. "The regime would like to scare you to death" with this statistic, but, he argued, the MB's success was largely the result of its effective mobilization of a relatively small, committed cadres of activists who seized the advantage in the face of very low turnout by ordinary Egyptians. The MB, said Ibrahim, may have already peaked, and they could be easily routed at the polls if only the larger body of secular, moderate Egyptians were empowered and encouraged to participate.

Links between reform and Arab-Israeli Peace?

¶18. (C) Doran sought to probe the perceived linkages between internal reform and international relations, especially the Arab-Israel conflict. All of his interlocutors emphasized that a comprehensive and just resolution to the Arab-Israel issue was crucial to the success of political reform, but they differed as to the reasons why. El-Hamagi said that the political leadership cannot fully focus on reform as long as the Arab-Israeli issue is unresolved. Shahbender argued that USG support for democratic reform inside various Arab states seems hypocritical when at the same time the USG supports Israel's actions in Lebanon and maintains the need for the Guantanamo detention facility. Ibrahim argued that a successful Arab-Israeli peace would significantly reduce Arab "anger" at the U.S. "The Arab people don't hate Americans," said Ibrahim, but "they are angry at Americans" for their perceived support for "injustice in the region." Demonstrated commitment to producing a fair and just peace would defuse the prevailing "surface anger" currently directed at the U.S. Solving the Arab-Israeli conflict, said Ibrahim, would take away the pretext for inaction on reform that Arab leaders have long resorted to.

"Democracy Must Remain Topmost"

¶19. (C) Shahbender said the Egyptian people had welcomed President Bush's call for democracy in Egypt and there was no doubt that there is a long-term confluence of interest between the USG's strategic push for democratic governments, as the best guarantor of stability, and the interests of ordinary people in the Middle East, who seek democratic governance and protection of individual freedom. But Shahbender also said the USG had sent "mixed signals" on reform during the past two years. Doran assured the group that President Bush remains deeply and personally committed to spreading democracy and expanding freedom in BMENA, and he noted that our diplomatic efforts and assistance programs will continue to reflect this fact.

Honor the Promises

¶110. (C) Summarizing the consensus of Doran's non-NDP interlocutors, Saad Eddin Ibrahim said the USG should "exert all of its persuasive power" to urge President Mubarak to "honor his own promises." Ibrahim said that none of Mubarak's 2005 campaign promises had yet been realized. He said that the USG should continue to press for at least six items:

--lifting of the state of emergency;
--relaxation of the political parties law, to allow the emergence of new, secular parties, which would blossom at the expense of the MB;
--reform of the Constitutional articles 76 and 77, which govern candidacy rules and term limits for the president;
--strengthening the independence of the judiciary;
--strengthening the independence and integrity of the media;
--relaxation of controls over NGOs and civil society.

Such actions by the GOE, said Ibrahim, would benefit Egypt and converge with U.S. interests. USG diplomatic pressure on the GOE would eliminate the perception that the USG "is backing away from reform."

¶11. (U) NSC Senior Director Doran cleared this message.
JONES